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ABSTRACT

Factors affecting persons in need of help have been of great concern to social psychologists. To investigate expressed willingness to seek help, evaluations of help-seekers, and the influence of the Protestant ethic on help seeking, college students completed questionnaires containing descriptions of eight situations in which a person was faced with a problem. Ninety-seven subjects enrolled in an introductory sociology course were asked to indicate how likely they would be to seek help in the situations described; 104 subjects in other sections of the same course were asked to indicate how their evaluations of a person who sought help in these situations would change. Subjects were randomly assigned questionnaires in which the help to be sought was either direct or indirect. The questionnaires concluded with the Mirels-Garrett Protestant Ethic Scale. Results indicated that subjects would be more likely to seek indirect help, help that aids persons to obtain a desired outcome themselves, than direct help, help that results in obtaining the desired outcome directly. Other subjects evaluated persons who sought direct help less favorably than persons who sought indirect help. Belief in the values of the Protestant ethic were inversely related to willingness to seek direct help but not related to willingness to seek indirect help. Belief in the values of the Protestant ethic were not related to evaluations of help seekers on either direct or indirect help. (JAC)

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SEEKING DIRECT OR INDIRECT HELP AND BELIEF IN THE PROTESTANT ETHIC

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Abstract

Subjects indicated they would be more likely to seek indirect help, help that aids persons to obtain a desired outcome themselves, than direct help, help that results in obtaining the desired outcome directly. Other subjects evaluated persons who sought direct help less favorably than persons who sought indirect help. Belief in the values of the Protestant ethic were inversely related to willingness to seek direct help but not related to willingness to seek indirect help. Belief in the values of the Protestant ethic were not related to evaluations of help seekers on either direct or indirect help.

Situations where persons in need receive or do not receive help from others have been of great concern to social psychologists since the 1960's. For most of these years, this concern was to account for when and why potential helpers would or would not help (Bar-Tal, 1976; Darley & Latané, 1970; Krebs, 1970). Recently, however, there has also been concern with understanding the reactions of the persons who are in need (Fisher, Nadler, and DePaulo, 1983; DePaulo, Nadler, and Fisher, 1983).

The plight of persons who are in need of help is not an easy one. They may desire to receive help, but asking for help may be an uncomfortable and upsetting experience. Persons in need often react by failing to seek help. This reluctance to seek help occurs on both major problems, such as psychiatric distress (Ryan, 1969), physical illness (McKinlay, 1972; Zola, 1966), and need for welfare aid (Cloward & Elman, 1966), and on minor problems, such as being lost in a strange city or needing help on improving one's backhand in tennis (DePaulo, 1982).

While the unpleasantness associated with seeking help may be a result of a number of factors, two social psychological processes have been proposed as key factors. Threat to self-esteem has been identified as the major psychological deterrent to seeking and receiving help by Fisher and Nadler (Fisher, Nadler & Whitcher-Algna, 1982; Fisher, DePaulo & Nadler, 1981). Shapiro (1983) has identified embarrassment as a major psychological cost of seeking help. Embarrassment is similar to loss of esteem but it emphasizes loss of public esteem rather than loss of self esteem as emphasized by Fisher & Nadler. Persons who seek and receive help have been found to experience embarrassment, feelings of inferiority, and loss of self-esteem (Alger & Russ, 1955; Blau, 1955; Fisher & Nadler, 1974; Haggstrom, 1974; Lipman & Sterne, 1962).

However, seeking help need not always lead to loss of public and/or private esteem. Loss of esteem may be reduced, and therefore help seeking increased, when seeking help is a relatively common response in a situation (Tessler & Schwartz, 1972), when the need for help does not reflect inadequacies on important central traits (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980; Wallston, 1976), when poor performance is already known or is obvious (Phillips, 1963; Shapiro, 1980), and when help seeking is infrequent (Blau, 1955, Nadler, Fisher & Ben-Itzhak, 1981).

Another factor that may affect loss of public and/or private esteem and therefore willingness to seek help is the form of help that is requested. Seeking help that results in obtaining the desired outcome directly, such as asking another for the answer to a problem (seeking direct help), should be evaluated more negatively than seeking help that would assist the help seekers to achieve the desired outcome themselves, such as asking advice on how to solve a problem (indirect help). Therefore persons should be more likely to seek indirect help than direct help.

A distinction similar to the direct/indirect help distinction was made by Asser (1978). Asser distinguished between "negotiating" and "didactic" styles of help seeking. In the negotiating style of seeking help, help seekers retain responsibility for solving the problem themselves while in the didactic style the help seekers ask not for advice in how to solve the problem but the problem solution itself.

In considering reactions of potential help seekers, personal characteristics have not been ignored (see Nadler, 1983). Two personality variables that have been found to affect willingness to seek help are self-esteem and need achievement. The effect of both, however, is moderated by characteristics of the request for help. Persons with high self esteem seek help less

frequently than those with low self esteem but only when seeking help implies inadequacies on important central characteristics (Tessler and Schwartz, 1972). Level of need achievement has been found to be both negatively (Tessler and Schwartz, 1972) and positively (Nadler & Eshet, 1983 reported in Nadler, 1983) related to help seeking. Nadler (1983) suggests that the effect of level of need achievement interacts with whether or not the poor performance might be improved by greater effort without seeking help.

Another personality characteristic that may be related to the willingness to seek help is belief in the Protestant ethic. The Protestant ethic is a set of values that Weber (1904-1905/1954) proposed facilitated the development of capitalism in Western societies. Values of the Protestant ethic include individualism, ascetecism, and industriousness. Belief in the Protestant ethic, like other personality characteristics, may be expected to interact with characteristics of the request for help, specifically whether the request involves seeking direct or indirect help. Seeking direct help would be incompatable with the Protestant ethic while seeking indirect help would not. Therefore belief in the Protestant ethic should be negatively related to the willingness to seek direct help but not to indirect help. Consistent with this view, belief in the Protestant ethic was found to be related to opposition toward a guaranteed minimum annual income (MacDonald, 1972).

This research investigates expressed willingness to seek direct or indirect help, evaluations of persons who seek direct or indirect help, and the relationship between these two variables and belief in the Protestant ethic. Specifically, it is hypothesized that persons should indicate that they would be less willing to seek direct help than indirect help. Persons should evaluate help seekers who sought direct help more unfavorably than help seekers who sought indirect help. Finally, it is hypothesized that belief in the Protestant

ethic should be negatively related to the willingness to seek direct help but not indirect help.

METHODS

Male and female undergraduates enrolled in four sections of an Introductory Sociology course at Central Michigan University served as subjects for this study. They were asked to fill out questionnaires during a normal class session. These questionnaires contained descriptions of eight situations where a person was faced with a problem. Students in two of the sections, 97 students, were asked to imagine that they were in these situations and to indicate, on a nine point scale, how likely they would be to seek help. Students in the other two sections, 104 students, were asked to indicate, on a nine point scale, how their evaluations would change, becoming more or less favorable, of a person who sought help in these situations.

Subjects were randomly assigned questionnaires in which the help to be sought (or had been sought) was either direct or indirect. An example of these situations is shown below in the form it was presented to subjects who were asked to indicate whether or not they would seek help.

> You are taking a course in biology and have to prepare a leaf collection for this class. You have collected the leaves but are having trouble identifying some of them. A person who lives near to you is a graduate student in biology. Would you ask this student to identify these leaves (direct help)/ to lend you some books on leaf identification (indirect help) or would you try to identify the leaves yourself without any help?

The same situation as it was presented to students asked to evaluate persons who sought help was:

> Student 1 is taking a course in biology and has to prepare a leaf collection for the class. Student 2, who is a graduate student in biology, lives near Student 1. Student 1 asks student 2 for help by asking Student

2 to identify the leaves that student 1 has collected (direct help)/ lend him/her some books on leaf identification (indirect help).

The eight situations were arranged in random order within the questionnaires. All eight situations are shown in Table 1. However, the major concern was not the response for each situation, but the overall response pattern to these eight situations. Responses to these eight situations were added together and then divided by eight. This produced measures of overall willingness to seek help and overall evaluations of persons who sought help.

All questionnaires contained a series of filler questions and concluded with the Mirels-Garrett Protestant Ethic Scale (Mirels & Garrett, 1971). This PE scale contains 19 statements on which respondents indicate, on a seven point scale, their degree of agreement. These statements relate to the Protestant ethic as discussed by Weber (1904-1905/1958). Representative statements are "There are few satisfactions equal to the realization that one has done his best at a job," and "If one works hard enough he is likely to make a good life for himself."

Mirels and Garrett reported the scale has good internal reliability(Cronbach's Alpha = .79). They also reported that scores on this PE scale were positively related to authoritarianism and internal locus of control.

RESULTS

The mean PE scores for subjects who were asked to indicate whether they would seek help was 83.5, with a standard deviation of 10.1. For those subjects asked to evaluate help seekers, the mean PE scores were 82.9, with a standard deviation of 10.5. PE scores were not significantly related to this dimension nor to whether the help involved was direct or indirect. These scores are comparable, although a bit lower, than the scores reported by Mirels and Garrett, a mean PE score of 85.6.

As hypothesized, subjects indicated they would be more likely to seek help if it were indirect help ($\bar{Y}$ = 7.16) than if it were direct help ($\bar{Y}$ = 5.73), $F_{1, 95} = 61.39$, $P < .001$. Also as hypothesized, subjects evaluated persons who sought indirect help more favorably ($\bar{Y}$ = 5.43) than persons who sought direct help ($\bar{Y}$ = 4.81), $F_{1, 102} = 10.98$, $P < .002$.

Scores on the PE scale were found to be inversely related to expressed willingness to seek help ($r=-.171$, $P<.05$). However, as hypothesized, this relationship was mediated by the direct/indirect nature of the help to be sought. Belief in the Protestant ethic was inversely related to expressed willingness to seek direct help ($r=-.294$, $P < .001$) but was not related to expressed willingness to seek indirect help ($r=.003$,ns.). Belief in the Protestant ethic was not related to evaluations of persons who sought either direct help ($r=.002$, ns) nor indirect help ($r=.027$, ns).

Another way to express the relationship between belief in the Protestant ethic and willingness to seek direct or indirect help is to look at the scores of willingness to seek help for subjects with a strong belief in the Protestant ethic and those who have a weak belief in the Protestant ethic. To do this PE scores were tricotomized. Subjects with scores 73 and below (36%) were characterized as having a weak belief in the Protestant ethic, while those with PE scores of 89 and above (32%) were characterized as strong believers in the Protestant ethic.

When help seeking involved indirect help, subjects with a strong belief in the Protestant ethic did not indicate that they would be less likely to seek help than subjects with a weak belief in the Protestant ethic ($\bar{Y}$ = 7.31 and 7.19, respectively). On the other hand, when the help seeking involved direct help seeking, those with a strong belief in the Protestant ethic indicated that they would be less likely to seek help than those with a weak belief in the Protestant ethic ($\bar{Y}$ = 5.37 and 5.96, respectively).

DISCUSSION

It was proposed that a useful distinction can be made between direct help, help that allows persons to directly reach goals, and indirect help, help that aids persons to reach goals themselves. The results of this study support this view. Subjects who were asked if they would seek direct help in a variety of situations indicated they would be less likely to do so than subjects who were asked if they would seek indirect help in the same situations. Furthermore, evaluations of persons who had sought direct help were less favorable than evaluations of persons who had sought indirect help. Since help seeking is often deterred by concerns of embarrassment and/or loss of self-esteem, the lowered evaluations associated with seeking direct help as opposed to indirect help may account for the greater reluctance to seek direct rather than indirect help.

This study also indicated that belief in the Protestant ethic is a personality variable related to help seeking. Like other personality variables related to help seeking, level of self-esteem and need achievement, the effects of belief in the Protestant ethic depend upon characteristics of the help seeking situation. Persons with strong belief in the values of the Protestant ethic indicate that they are less likely to seek direct help than persons with weaker belief in the values of the Protestant ethic. However, no such difference is found with regard to indirect help.

The results of this study should be interpreted cautiously, however. The situations that were used in this study were commonplace situations where it was desirable to obtain help but not essential. In situations where the need for help is much more important, the desire to obtain the sought after goal might render the increased psychological costs involved in seeking direct help less important.

Furthermore, this study did not involve actual instances of help seeking but reports of how persons would have acted. Additional research that investigates the same variables in instances of actual help seeking is warranted.

Table 1

Help Seeking Situations *

You are taking a course in biology and have to prepare a leaf collection for this class. You have collected the leaves but are having trouble identifying some of them. A person who lives near you is a graduate student in biology. Would you ask this student to identify these leaves (to lend you some books on leaf identification) or would you try to identify the leaves by yourself without any help from this student?

In one of your classes you are given an assignment to look up some material from the 1960 and 1980 census. Since you have never used census material, you do not know where they are located. As you enter the government documents section of the library, you notice two librarians talking to each other. Would you ask the librarian to get you the census volumes you need (to tell you how census material is filed) or would you try to find the material yourself?

You are enrolled in a class where the instructor has given an assignment to use the computer to analyze some data and then to write a report on this. You feel uncertain on how to use the computer, despite the instructor's handout on how to do so. Another student in the class is a computer science major. Would you ask this person to do the computer part of the assignment for you (to show you how to operate the computer) or would you try to do the computing by yourself?

You have a five page paper which is due in two days. The professor indicated that typed papers would be preferred but handwritten papers would be acceptable. Your typewriter is broken but the person across the hall has one. Would you ask this person to type the paper for you (lend you their typewriter) or would you write the paper in long-hand?

You are walking around a campus building looking for a professor's office but you can't seem to find it. You see another student who seems to know his/her way around the building. Would you ask the student to show you the way to the professor's office (to give you directions to the professor's office) or would you keep trying to find the professor's office by yourself?

The gears of your 10 speed bike are giving you some trouble. You know the person who lives across the hall from you works part-time for a bicycle shop. Would you or would you not ask this person to fix the gears on your bike (to show you how to repair and adjust bicycle gears)?

You are taking a class which has turned out to be more difficult than you had expected. After two exams, you have a D in this class. You know a person who took the same class last semester. Would you or would you not ask this person to give you copies of last year's exams (to help you study for the next exam)?

You see a close friend of yours talking with an extremely attractive person of the opposite sex. You decide you would like to go out with that person. Would you ask your friend to arrange a date for you with this person (to introduce you to this person) or would you try to meet and get a date with this person yourself?

*Direct help seeking wording comes first and then indirect help seeking wording in parenthesis.

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